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Sens. Boren and Cohen Back Webster for CIA

Nominee Vows Cooperation With Committee

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Washington Post Staff Writers

The chairman and vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence warmly endorsed FBI Director William H. Webster to become the new director of the Central Intelligence Agency yesterday after Webster pledged to be neither "devious" nor "cute" in his dealings with the panel.

Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.), noting Webster's reputation for honesty and credibility, said at the end of two days of hearings that he thinks Webster is "confirmable" but intends to wait the required 14 days after hearings end before bringing his nomination to a vote.

Vice Chairman William S. Cohen (R-Maine) concurred, saying he thinks Webster has done an "outstanding job" as FBI director for nine years and would do the same as CIA director.

Asked about the danger of going ahead with Webster's confirmation before the completion of forthcoming investigations exploring the FBI role in the Iran-contra affair, Cohen said Congress has to "assume some reasonable risk," and not wait until September or October to know the outcome of probes by two select committees of Congress.

The intelligence committee held a two-hour open session followed by a shorter executive session. Boren said afterward there is still a possibility of further hearings if any new information relevant to Webster's nomination surfaces.

Unlike Wednesday's hearing, which was dominated by tough questions about Webster's behavior during the unfolding of the Iran-contra affair, yesterday the few senators present seemed more interested in establishing a good working relationship with the probable new CIA director.

Both Boren and Cohen promised Webster there would be no leaks of information from the committee and that they had already agreed with the Senate leadership that any member would be removed if found guilty of violating this rule. Webster, in turn, promised he would work closely with the committee.

"I give you my solemn pledge I will not try to be devious or cute with the committee," he said.

Boren almost apologized for bringing up the issue of an FBI memorandum withheld from the committee until Tuesday night that showed Webster had been warned that former national security council aide Lt. Col. Oliver L. North might become the object of a criminal prosecution because of his activities on behalf of the Nicaraguan rebels.

Boren said it was "an error" on Webster's part not to have provided the document earlier along with his written answers to committee questions about his knowledge of any criminal activities by U.S. officials in the contra resupply operation.

He said it could have been a "difference of interpretations" about whether the document was relevant but told Webster that if he had any doubts in the future about what to disclose to the committee, he hoped he would "err on the side of disclosure."

Webster, in turn, said that after checking the record he found that the FBI document had not reached his office until Oct. 31, one day after he had agreed at the request of Attorney General Edwin Meese III to suspend a bureau investigation into possible violations of the Neutrality Act by Americans involved in the contra resupply operation.

The FBI director made several pledges about how he would deal with the initiation of covert actions and informing the committee about them, two key issues in the Iran-contra affair about which it was kept in the dark by former CIA Director William J. Casey.

In every instance, he agreed to act differently from his predecessor. He said he considered a retroactive presidential "finding" authorizing a covert action after the fact to be illegal and would inform the committee if such action ever occurs. In November 1985, Casey approved such a finding and never sought to tell the committee about the action itself, which involved secret arms shipments to Iran.

Casey, who had signed an explicit agreement with committee leaders in 1984 and 1986 to inform them of all covert activities, withheld from them all information about the Iran initiative for 14 months. Webster agreed with Cohen that if the finding of Jan. 17, 1986, authorizing the sale of arms to Tehran had been disclosed to the committee, "Iran never would have taken place."

"I agree with that," Webster replied.

Webster also made a general pledge that he would act only on a written finding or an oral one received directly from the president in a crisis situation.

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), whose critical questioning of Deputy CIA Director Robert M. Gates led to withdrawal of his nomination to replace Casey last month, pressed Webster for a decision on Gates' future before a vote is taken on Webster's confirmation.

Webster promised to review all activities of all CIA officials, including Gates, during the Iran-contra affair and to take "appropriate action." But he warned against a "hasty rush to judgment" on Gates.

Later, Boren went out of his way to support Gates, praising him for "outstanding service" and having "kept this chairman extremely well informed about the activities of the agency" since becoming acting CIA director.

Webster said he looked forward to working with Gates as well.

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